

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE JOIN GANGS?

Try to Understand Why Your Children Might Join Gangs *(Written to parents, teachers, administrators & mentor)*

Many times children feel they have no choice. They may prefer to not become a gang member but they cannot see any other way to avoid the situation. Children may be living in fear on a daily basis and see joining a gang as a solution to problems. The pressure to join a gang may be very strong. Parents must provide children with a safe loving home environment plus help them get to school safely. It is also the parents' responsibility to see that school is a safe place to learn and play.

Children may join a gang as a means of protection from rival gangs. Children may view their neighborhood gang as a solution to the torment and threats from other gangs. Parents must work to see that the neighborhood is a safe place for their children to play, learn and live. Parents need to work together to monitor children and provide law enforcement with information to help keep the neighborhood safe. If children get into trouble with law, parents must let their children suffer the consequences for illegal behavior. Protecting children from the law does not teach responsibility. Children often choose to join gangs if their friends or family members belong. In order to "fit in" with other gang members, children may also begin to wear certain colors or other types of clothing associated with gangs. They may wear distinctive hairstyles, use gang terminology, and get involved with gang activities. If a parent notices any of these indicators it is a signal that the child is interested in a gang or has already joined. Children often have unsupervised time. If this becomes excessive, children will search for something to do to prevent boredom. Gang activities can fill the excess time. Parents should be involved in coordinating and sponsoring activities for their children. More activities and parental involvement will decrease the strength a gang has in the neighborhood. Parents should form community groups that are willing to supervise children's activities. It is also important to know where your child is at all times. Make them accountable for their time and actions. Gang activities appear exciting to children. Children, especially teens, like to take risks. Gangs provide many opportunities to take risks and find excitement. Make sure your children are involved in sports, clubs or other activities that provide healthy risk taking opportunities. Get children involved with community work to help make neighborhoods safe.

The appeal of obtaining money fast can be overwhelming for children. We live in a society that advocates immediate gratification at any expense. Gangs are involved in drugs and other criminal activities that give children opportunities to get money quickly. Children may be offered more money for delivering a package or being a lookout than their parents can earn in a week. Children must understand the risks and realize that consequences will be enforced. They must also realize that they are being used by older gang members who do not want to get caught.

Teach your children to have pride in their accomplishments and to legitimately earn money. Parents must encourage the system to be consistent and to support the legal system. Report related activities to the police. Encourage children to stay in school in order to be qualified for a job. Give children responsibilities around the house, encourage work ethics and encourage children to seek jobs in the community. Children who feel valuable and important in the home will feel more comfortable with others. Parents need to teach children how to share, compromise and take turns, how to listen to what others have to say, and how to be a group member. Since the gang may be the most active organization in the neighborhood, parents must provide the opportunity for participation in youth organizations and athletic teams in order for children to practice group skills. If organizations do not exist in the neighborhood, parents must be willing to get involved to manage them. Also, set a good example for your children when you participate in group settings.

Children may feel that they do not have a sense of purpose in life and seek gang activities to reinforce their self-esteem. Parents must strengthen children's sense of purpose by setting expectations for their personal behavior. Expect your children to have respect for others, to obey authority, to be honest and to do one's best. Help children set realistic goals so they feel a sense of accomplishment. Challenge your children to expand their interests. Work with the school to determine what opportunities are available for children. Keep communications open with school authorities and teachers. Children may join a gang to retaliate for personal injury or damage to friends or family. Parents must develop a support group in the

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community that can deal with children's sorrow or frustration. If necessary there are agencies and school employees who are capable of helping children to deal with these feelings of anger.

General Reasons for Gang Membership

The primary age group of gang members ranges generally from 13 to 21 years. Interviews of gang members indicate that joining a gang is seldom understood by the gang members themselves, but can vary from brotherhood to self-preservation as listed below.

1. Identity

Gang members cannot achieve an identity in their environment, so they gain it in the gang culture. They often visualize themselves as warriors against the outside world, protecting their neighborhood.

2. Protection

Joining a gang in a community with several gangs offers considerable protection from violence and attack from rival gangs.

3. Fellowship

Studies indicate that a tight family structure is lacking in the home environment. Gang activity offers that closeness, that sense of family that is often lacking in the home.

4. Intimidation

Membership can become very dangerous at this level of "recruitment." New members are forced to join by threats, violent beatings, and initiations in order to increase membership. No ethnic group or geographical location is excluded. Unlike gangs in the past, we are seeing mixed ethnic and socio-economic groups making up gangs. There is an on-going struggle for territorial control and the lucrative drug market among gangs in our community. School personnel, parents and community members need to be aware of these dynamics in their schools, homes, and in the community at large.

Personal Reasons for Gang Membership

There are a variety of personal reasons for young people joining gangs. These include: the excitement of gang activity, the need to belong, peer pressure, attention, financial benefit, family tradition, and a lack of realization of the hazards involved. This also is a way students with poor self-concept increase their self-esteem. These young people seek to attain recognition for their activities, whether criminal or not. Gangs supply that extra pat-on-the-back that they might not receive at home or at school. Parents need to be aware of what's going on in their child's life. If young people cannot communicate their concerns and problems to someone significant at home or at school, they could make a negative decision to join a gang, which would affect them for the rest of their lives.

Characteristics of Gangs

Characteristics in gang behavior can range from a poor general attitude to clear-cut personality disorders that can at times parallel the criminal mind. Caution is wise when thinking one can place all gangs into one behavioral category. A gang member on his/her own "turf" in school or in the community may be openly hostile. Outside the turf, the gang member may seem likable, open and friendly. But he/she has his/her own code and sense of fairness and can easily turn on one when the code is violated. This can often result in sudden non-cooperation, or worse, violent retaliation. The gang member is a good con artist and can easily manipulate his/her environment as it suits his/her needs. Appearance can be very deceiving. But, a gang member can also display poor internalizing skills, be chronically angry, resentful of authority, and can be an accomplished liar. The more violent gang member can be callused, remorseless, lack realistic long-term goals, be prone to easy boredom and have poor impulse control. Today in many mature, modern criminal street gangs violence is often a means to an end. Material profit, through drug trafficking and other criminal activities, is the prime objective. Studies in modern gang behavior indicate that violent gangs have a

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strong capacity to deal with fear and are therefore not easily intimidated by authority. They have cut fear off. They experience excitement at every stage of a crime, are concrete thinkers, have little interest in responsible performance or a display of ownership. They consider themselves basically decent human beings, and therefore justified in what they do. Each gang member wants to be in charge, but often has poor leadership skills, is chronically angry and defensive, cannot be structured or do tasks for a protracted period of time.

Gang Recruitment Tactics

Gangs pressure kids into gangs by using the following methods:

- ❑ Peer pressure, offer protection.
- ❑ Threaten safety of friends or family members.
- ❑ Offer money for what appears to be simple activities.
- ❑ Challenge kids to take risks.
- ❑ Attend parties where gang related activities are occurring.
- ❑ Family members already belong to a gang.

Consequences of Gang Involvement

Short Term:

- ❑ In trouble with the law
- ❑ Drop out of school.
- ❑ Withdrawal from family.
- ❑ Risk of injury in a "jump-in" by your own gang.
- ❑ Drug trafficking/weapons.
- ❑ Involvement in "dirty-work."

Long Term:

- ❑ Lose opportunity for education and employment.
- ❑ Spend time in jail or prison.
- ❑ Possibility of losing family and friends.
- ❑ Risk of personal injury.
- ❑ Risk your own family's life.
- ❑ Endless amounts of threats, assaults and drive-by shootings.

Early Warning Signs

- **Graffiti** is a clear marking of territorial boundaries which serves as a warning and challenge to rival gangs. It is also used to communicate messages between gangs.
- **Youth hanging out** around public parks, high schools, fast food stands, convenience stores and other hang outs for teenagers. Frequent use of public phone booths by people who actually receive calls there.
- **Increase in crime** - Gang related acts such as vandalism, assaults, burglaries, robberies, and even random drive-by shootings.